

Brian Jungen and Kenojuak Ashevak

Kenojuak #1 and Preening Owl

by Yasmin Nurning-Por



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Born in Fort St. John, BC—the near North—in 1970, artist Brian Jungen rose to prominence in late 1990s with a series of works titled *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998–2005) that repurposed Nike Air Jordans into sculptures resembling Northwest Coast Indigenous masks. These early works were instigated by visits Jungen paid to the American Museum of Natural History and the Nike store in New York City as a young artist, where he recognized the similarities between the display of commercial commodities and the ethnographic installations of First Nations cultures and objects in museum spaces. Since then, Jungen has established himself as a skilled seer of the potential for reconfiguration in everyday objects from an Indigenous perspective.

Similar to the artist's early *Prototypes* series, the sculpture *Kenojuak #1* (2016) is composed of reassembled Nike Air Jordans and is displayed on a tall plinth. This work, however, strays from his previous use of coastal masks and, instead, references the preeminent Inuit artist Kenojuak Ashevak, CC, ON, RCA (1927–2013), widely known for her prints and drawings. *Kenojuak #1* begins with a flat bottom of red-rubber soles that soon erupts into a series of curvilinear bands and shoe tongues that share tonal and

formal similarities to many works by the Kinngait (Cape Dorset), NU, artist. The deconstructed footwear, trimmed in crimson and blue, bend and loop to form the graphic, teardrop-like plumage common in many of Ashevak's renderings of Arctic birds, such as the 1995 print *Preening Owl*—released as part of the Annual Cape Dorset Print Collection three years prior to the beginning of Jungen's sculptural series *Prototypes*. Interestingly, *Kenojuak #1* (2016) offers a less immediate reading of Indigenous motifs than *Prototypes*, requiring viewers to look closer. From behind, the assembled materials swirl in a composition that is not quite the mirror of the other side—a twist on the bilateral symmetry in the compositions of many of Ashevak's print. For me, Jungen's positioning of a set of circular eyes located at a proportional height to numerous Ashevak owl works, provided the visual anchor for revealing the plumage reference.

As a young artist, Jungen largely created drawings but made a marked shift towards sculpture after 1998. He would later return to working in two dimensions in 2011 when he created *Five Year Universe*—a series of hide prints on black foam, his first foray into printmaking—motivated by an interest in trading prints with other Indigenous artists. In *Kenojuak #1*, Jungen creates space and

acknowledges the importance of Ashevak's influence on his internationally recognized contemporary art practice—a realm from which Inuit artists have often been excluded. Her presence is often more subtle than in this direct reference. It is merely suggested in the accompanying sculpture *Owl Drugs* (2016), which shares striking formal similarities to *Kenojuak #1* and nods to Ashevak's proclivity for owls.

To me, it remains interesting that Jungen would choose this specific form of sculpture to commemorate Ashevak, three years after her death. "I got interested in printmaking largely out of the Inuit tradition," Jungen has said, noting the particular emphasis on symmetrical compositions that attempt to reconcile how to present both sides of a subject in a two-dimensional space. Provided Jungen's penchant for working in series, frequent return to materials and the numbered title of this piece, perhaps these works will continue to grow.

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OPPOSITE
Brian Jungen

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Kenojuak #1
2016
Nike Air Jordans
and brass
44.5 × 64.8 × 34.3 cm
COURTESY CASEY KAPLAN
PHOTO JEAN VONG

RIGHT
Kenojuak Ashevak
(1927–2013 Kinngait)
—
Preening Owl
1995
Stonecut
50.7 × 66 cm
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